Why You Haven't Heard of George Whitefield, the Great Awakening Preacher

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George Whitefield was one of the most dynamic and famous Christian ministers of the 18th century, yet today remains relatively unknown. A British clergyman of the Anglican Church, Whitefield's eloquent oratory skills and charismatic personality helped spark the spiritual revival known as "The Great Awakening" throughout Britain, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the North American colonies.

George Whitefield

- **Known For**: Anglican clergyman famous for his spellbinding, revival-style preaching to most of the 18th-century English-speaking world during "The Great Awakening."
- **Parents**: Thomas and Elizabeth Whitefield
- **Born**: December 16, 1714, in Gloucester, Gloucestershire, England
- **Died**: September 30, 1770, in Newburyport, Massachusetts, United States
- **Published Works:** *Journal*; Various sermons*; A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend George Whitefield*; *A Further Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend George Whitefield*.
- **Notable Quote**: "A dead ministry will always make a dead people, whereas if ministers are warmed with the love of God themselves, they cannot but be instruments of diffusing that love among others."

Childhood Theatrical Talent

Whitefield grew up in Gloucester, England, where he worked as a boy in his parents' inn and tavern. His father was also a wine merchant who died when George was only 2 years old. In childhood, George discovered an unquenchable passion and extraordinary gift for the performing arts. He read theatrical works endlessly and even skipped classes to practice his school performances. Whitefield

might have become a famous actor had he not been called to the ministry. His boyhood theatre experience would serve him well in the future.

While working to put himself through Pembroke College at Oxford University, Whitefield met John Wesley and his brother Charles. He joined their Christian club of zealous students, branded "Methodists" by their critics because of their systematic approach to religious affairs. It was during this time that Whitefield experienced a profound spiritual conversion described as the "new birth."

New Birth Mission

Whitefield's conversion experience set him on a mission—the Great Commission—to preach the gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ to people everywhere. After his ordination in the Anglican Church of England, Whitefield began preaching. His first sermon was delivered at age 21.

[SVG] British Methodist evangelist George Whitefield (1714 - 1770). Hulton Archive / Getty Images

Because he often confronted the religious establishment, church doors began to close to Whitefield. He took to preaching outdoors, a practice that was virtually unheard of in his day. He preached multiple times a day, and soon crowds of thousands were hanging on his every word wherever he spoke.

Eventually, Whitefield's mission would launch him across the Atlantic Ocean to the colonies in America. His first journey in 1739-40, would later become known as "The Great Awakening." It wasn't long before churches were unable to hold the enormous crowds that came to hear Whitefield. Once again, he resorted to delivering his sermons in open air gatherings.

Marvel of the Age

With his flair for dramatic expression, Whitefield's sermons were exceptional, bringing the characters of the Bible to life like never before. Not only were his audiences unprecedented in size, but his listeners found themselves spellbound. Mobs of enthusiastic people practically trampled one another to hear the celebrated preacher. Later, these same crowds would be awestruck into absolute silence as Whitefield delivered his mesmerizing oration.

In Northampton, Massachusetts, Whitefield stayed in the home of Jonathan

Edwards, the fiery revivalist preacher of the Reformed Churches. Edwards, who attended all of Whitefield's services, was repeatedly moved to tears. Edward's wife, Sarah, observed, "He makes less of the doctrines than our American preachers generally do and aims more at affecting the heart. He is a born orator. A prejudiced person, I know, might say that this is all theatrical artifice and display, but not so will anyone think who has seen and known him."

Members of the press dubbed George Whitefield "the marvel of the age." The spiritual revival that he helped to spark—The First Great Awakening—was a defining event in American history. Whitefield's final sermon of this tour was held at the Boston Commons and drew a crowd of 23,000 people—the single largest assembly in American history to date.

Discordant View on Slavery

While far from an abolitionist, Whitefield was deeply disturbed to witness the brutal treatment of slaves. With increasing frequency, he sought to preach the good news to them. He also rebuked slaveowners who mistreated their slaves and deprived them access to hearing the gospel. Whitefield's messages were so well received by slaves that some historians labeled their response to him the start of African-American Christianity.

Still, Whitefield accepted slavery, supported the practice, and even owned a plantation with slaves in Georgia. The estate was purchased for him by friends to help fund Whitefield's orphanage for wayward boys in Bethesda, Georgia. Whitefield, it seems, had more concern for orphans than distress over the plight of Blacks. Historians have called Whitefield's dissonant view on slavery "the one dark blot upon an otherwise unspotted career." At the time, however, Whitefield's position was not uncommon among White Christians in America, with only the Quakers criticizing the practice of slaveholding and labeling it sin.

A Helpmate

Whitefield sought a wife who would be a helpmate to him in his tireless missionary journeys and orphanage work. In 1741, he married Elizabeth James, a 36-year-old widow from Wales and a recent convert to Christianity. Elizabeth gave birth to their only child in 1743, but the baby boy died only four months later. Whitefield's wife ministered by his side for 28 years until her death in London in 1769. Shortly after, George left for America, where he would die a year later.

A Quiet Legacy

Whitefield's preaching ministry spanned 33 years during which he traveled seven times to America, 15 times to Scotland, and exhaustively throughout England and Wales. His most significant impact was felt in America and Scotland, where the winds of revival had already begun to blow through the ministry of local pastors and evangelists.

Along with the Wesleys, Whitefield was one of the co-founders of Methodism. However, Whitefield followed the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, while the Wesley brothers rested in the Arminian theology of conditional election or free will. After a split over these theological differences occurred, Whitefield relinquished leadership in the Methodist societies to Welsey.

Passion was the key to Whitefield's fruitful preaching ministry, and he never lost his zeal for speaking of Christ. Driven to evangelize, he said, "God forbid that I should travel with anybody a quarter of an hour without speaking of Christ to them." Even when his health declined, and he was warned to slow down, he insisted, "I would rather wear out than rust out." On the day before his death, Whitefield preached his final sermon in a field atop a large wooden barrel.

Whitefield's sermons presented a clear and balanced pronouncement of God's sovereignty and his free offer of salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ. The tone of his meetings was non-denominational, uniting people of any background. His urgent, intensely emotional, and dramatically expressive delivery created a channel for God's Word to penetrate hearts and capture souls for the Kingdom of God. At Whitefield's funeral, John Wesley said that history records none "who called so many myriads of sinners to repentance."

Whitefield established no churches, movements, or denominations in his lifetime, but he took the Great Commission seriously. He was the first person in America to skyrocket to celebrity status, but remain a man of high integrity. He was the Billy Graham of his day.

Whitefield's messages even moved and impressed the skeptic Benjamin Franklin. After he and Whitefield became friends, Franklin printed the evangelist's *Journal*, which turned out to be a best-selling publication. Franklin also built a large auditorium in Philadelphia for Whitefield to hold his crusades, since the churches there could not contain the crowds.

Whitefield was a preacher who commanded audiences of thousands with only the use of his unamplified voice and charismatic personality. How does such a person spend his lifetime preaching at least 18,000 times to perhaps 10 million hearers and not be remembered more notably? George Whitefield understood his mission clearly—to spread the gospel of the new birth. In that mission, he succeeded. He did not seek to build a name for himself or a legacy on earth. Instead, George Whitefield spent his strength pointing people to Jesus Christ so they could know his Savior and experience his life-changing new birth.

Sources

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